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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000270

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: FRENCH AND VATICAN AMBASSADORS
PESSIMISTIC

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In separate introductory meetings with Charge Sison, Dean of the Diplomatic Corps and Papal Nuncio Luigi Gatti and French Charge d'Affaires Andre Parant expressed similar views on Lebanon's ongoing political impasse, including the role of regional actors, Lebanon's Christians, the Special Tribunal, and Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's remote prospects of becoming president. The meetings occurred one day after hundreds of thousands of Lebanese gathered in downtown Beirut to commemorate the third anniversary of the assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri, on the one hand, and (in much smaller numbers) the funeral of slain Hizballah leader Mougnieh on the other, presenting two contrasting visions for Lebanon. End summary.

¶2. (C) The Charge, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, paid separate introductory calls on Dean of the Diplomatic Corps and Papal Nuncio Luigi Gatti and French Charge d'Affaires Andre Parant (accompanied by French DCM Joseph Silva) on February 15.

TWO RALLIES, TWO VISIONS

¶3. (C) Gatti agreed with the Charge that Lebanon's security forces had done a commendable job in maintaining law and order during the February 14 rally and funeral, noting that Hizballah also had made an effort to control the internal situation. Parant observed that the March 14 coalition took both security and political risks with the February 14 rally. Although he dismissed the actual number of people who participated as being of secondary importance, he said the event demonstrated March 14's ability to rally its supporters, especially given the inclement weather. The fact that the March 14 rally and Mougnieh's funeral both occurred

peacefully demonstrated that there was an "understanding" between the two camps to avoid violence.

¶14. (C) Parant found the contrast between the two events "astonishing," adding that they revealed two distinct visions for Lebanon, one a democratic, independent country, and the other "Hizballistan." He applauded majority leader Saad Hariri's speech as firm and effective in extending a hand to the opposition, adding that Saad had shown marked improvement in his last three public speeches. In contrast, he described Hizballah SYG Nasrallah's speech at the Mougnieh funeral as "virulent." The presence of Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki and IRCG officials at the funeral and absence of Syrian officials was noteworthy, he said. Questioning why the site of Mougnieh's assassination in Damascus was cleared so quickly, he noted that the Syrian press was not blaming Israel.

THE ONGOING POLITICAL IMPASSE

¶15. (C) Gatti attributed Lebanon's never-ending political problems to Lebanese "egocentrism" that puts individual interests first, followed by those of the "clan," then the wider community, with national interests coming in last place. Acknowledging that the Lebanese situation was complicated by the regional context, with Lebanon torn between the Iranian/Syrian and the U.S./European/Saudi blocs, but in the end the problem always came back to the Lebanese ego. Furthermore, caught between the two "giants" of Israel and Syria, Lebanon needs to be on good terms with the rest of the world, he said, but the world is developing Lebanon fatigue.

¶16. (C) The current situation was the worst yet, Gatti said, with all of Lebanon's institutions either blocked or non-existent. He saw no way out in the near future absent

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some "external force" that imposed a solution. Lebanon's confessional system needed to be changed, he said, adding, "The Lebanese need to have the courage of the surgeon to cut if surgery is the only option." Many Christians were beginning to accept this, he claimed, and thinking in terms of a power sharing arrangement divided equally among Christian, Sunni and Shia in which the president no longer must be a Maronite. But are the Lebanese ready for this? he asked, adding that Lebanese Christians were divided into two groups with nothing in common. This Christian split in turn revolved in a vicious circle around the Shia-Sunni conflict, which reflected regional divisions.

¶17. (C) Monsignor Gatti agreed with the Charge that recent attacks on Maronite Patriarch Sfeir by Marada leader Suleiman Franjeh were unacceptable. However, he added, Sfeir merited "one out of a thousand" of the critiques, given his willingness to enter into the political game last year by providing a list of seven presidential candidates. Unfortunately, he said, the Patriarch listens to his advisors and complicates the situation. I've told him to stay out of politics, Gatti said, but he doesn't listen to me. Gatti also revealed rumors that one of the Maronite Bishops had told Franjeh to attack Sfeir, in what was probably part of an internal succession battle. However, Gatti, who had seen Sfeir the previous evening, said the Patriarch denied any intentions of stepping down.

¶18. (C) For his part, Parant was somewhat more optimistic on the current political situation, commenting that March 14 appeared to have gained a bit of confidence in the past month and was now on the offensive. Reports that the Saudis will deposit \$1 billion in Lebanon's Central Bank, the momentum on the Tribunal, and the pressure on Syria from the upcoming Arab League Summit all work in the majority's favor, he said. The opposition, along with Syria and Iran, are blocking the Arab League initiative because time plays in their favor, so

it is critical for March 14 to maintain its momentum.

¶19. (C) To capitalize on this momentum, Parant continued, March 4 should reinforce the government by adding two or three Christians, such as Amine Gemayel, although he admitted that appointing new Shia was a delicate issue that the opposition would view as a provocation. The Siniora government should take action on pending nominations and promotions, but prudently, he said. Finally it should address the growing poverty in Lebanon. The majority can not leave the social welfare net to Hizballah, he stressed; instead, it should engage in high impact, high visibility measures to improve the lives of Lebanese citizens.

¶10. (C) Parant confirmed that Finance Minister Azour would travel to Paris on February 21 to sign a \$375 million soft loan agreement involving three tranches: \$175 million Euro for debt reduction, that two tranches of \$100 million Euro each tied to telecom privatization and the gas excise tax. These measures would breathe fresh air into the government, he said. Stressing the importance of support for the army as well, Parant said France provides training and equipment for both the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF). Ten percent of its cooperation budget has gone to the Ministry of Defense, he said, especially in the form of ammunition for the LAF's fight against Fatah al-Islam last summer in the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian camp.

ARAB LEAGUE INITIATIVE

¶11. (C) Gatti dismissed the Arab League initiative, commenting that historically the Arab League had never had any power, with each country pursuing its own policies and then coming together only to issue declarations. Even today, the members are not united, with some siding with Syria and others with the U.S. SYG Amr Moussa has lost patience, he said, as indicated from his last declaration.

¶12. (C) Gatti said the Vatican had no position on the Arab

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League initiative; Lebanon's survival was its interest, along with combating extremism, whether Muslim or Christian. The Vatican wants to see Lebanon's institutions functioning and heading their responsibilities, such as parliament electing a president. However, he added, there are no valid Christian leaders who have a strong enough personality to make themselves heard.

SPECIAL TRIBUNAL

¶13. (C) Gatti stressed the importance of the Special Tribunal becoming operational as quickly as possible. Parant also stressed the need for UNIIIC to have all its preparatory work ready so the Tribunal could start on time. International justice has been long in coming for Lebanon, he said, and UNIIIC needed to explain why so people did not lose hope.

ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT

¶14. (C) Gatti also suggested that Syria should not be condemned before the Arab League summit in Damascus, since it was important to give Syria something. If Lebanon's seat at the summit is empty, he hoped other countries would boycott the meeting. Similarly, Parant said Lebanon's absence from the Arab League summit would be problematic. If, in that case, Egypt and Saudi Arabia did not send high level delegates, the summit would be a total failure.

AOUN'S IDEE FIXE

¶15. (C) Aoun, whom Gatti said he had known in his younger

days, had changed a lot from the days when he was a moderate player staying above the fray of petty politics. Since his return from exile in France, said Gatti, all Aoun wants is to be president, a goal Gatti labeled nearly completely hopeless. Aoun is now completely dependent on Hizballah, which gives the impression that Aoun is the opposition's spokesperson, but the reality is that Aoun is neither psychologically or politically free to choose, Gatti said. The opposition's eye now was on increasing the quantity and quality of its cabinet positions, and having a say in key military appointments.

¶16. (C) Parant called Aoun an "obsessed case" who gets worse with age. He lives in the past, and sees himself as another DeGaulle, Parant said, noting Aoun's disappointment when he did not receive red carpet treatment after his return from exile in France. Aoun has no chance of becoming president, Parant stated; neither Hizballah and Syria want him as president but instead are using him to block a political agreement. Aoun is their prisoner, and even if he wanted to leave, he cannot without endangering his own life. Aoun's alliance with Hizballah was a strategic error, Parant commented, but he is incapable of changing course because of his own pride.

¶17. (C) French DCM Silva added that Aoun had lost Christian support because of his alliance with Hizballah. He still had some loyal supporters, but mainly because they reject other Christian leaders. Furthermore, Silva continued, Aoun's history of opposing Syria and his campaign against corruption, along with his populist discourse, also bring him support. Unfortunately, Parant commented, March 14 also has been inept in handling their relationship with Aoun.

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